
A Framework for Gender Justice: Evaluating the Transformative Capacities of Three Key Australian Schooling Initiatives

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Abstract

Through a feminist agenda that seeks to redress gender inequities through remedies of redistribution and recognition, this paper draws on Fraser's work (1997) to articulate a framework of transformative justice. In moving beyond the competing logics underpinning such remedies, this framework adopts a transformative theory and politics in problematising and seeking to restructure the inequitable gender differentiation of political-economic structures and social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. This framework of gender justice is presented as useful in evaluating the ideologies and practices of particular schooling initiatives and thus is drawn on to critically assess three initiatives that currently seek to address issues of social/gender equity in education within Australia: The New Basics Project, The Productive Pedagogies Framework and the Success for Boys initiative. In particular, the paper critically explores these initiatives in terms of their capacities for enabling or constraining a transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice.

Introduction

The 'boy turn' in the gender debate (Weaver-Hightower 2003) over the past decade or so has proliferated numerous curriculum and pedagogy related reforms and interventions for boys under the auspices of gender equity. The most expensive and comprehensive reform in Australia to date is the recently announced DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training) supported 19.4 million dollar 'Success for Boys' program that builds on stages one and two of the seven million dollar Boys' Education Lighthouse Schools programs. *Success for Boys* aims to improve boys' motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes (DEST 2005). The overview states:

The Australian Government is committed to helping all young Australians achieve strong educational outcomes. Research shows that overall, while many boys in Australian schools are doing well, boys are not achieving as well as girls across a range of educational and social measures.

Boys are more likely to drop out of school early and less likely to go on to university than girls. Boys achieve lower literacy scores and are more likely to experience discipline problems than girls (DEST 2005).

Such programs can clearly be associated with the enduring moral concern about boys' schooling performance – a concern, of course, that continues to provide a pervasive warrant for the generous and ongoing allocation of funding for boys, but a concern, nevertheless, that is invariably fuelled by the reductionist and reactionary arguments of a 'competing victims' approach to the issue of gender equity (Cox 2002).

In this regard, such programs must be understood within broader reductionist cultures of performativity that have worked to re-articulate equity to stress academic outcomes (Taylor & Henry 2000). Here a focus on crude indicators of success and failure (such as those associated with easily quantifiable standardised tests) and essentialised accounts of gender have promoted a 'failing boys' discourse and a sense that all girls are now outperforming all boys. This climate has undoubtedly made more possible the overwrought concerns with boys' schooling performance, particularly in the area of literacy and school retention rates (Hayes 2003, Lingard 2003). Such programs must also be located within a backlash context fuelled by public discourse, particularly the media, against feminist gains in education (Hayes 2003). Here a common understanding is that 'girls' strategies' in schools have gone too far, are now unfair to boys and should be rectified in favour of boys' needs (Hayes 2003, Kenway & Willis 1998).

In response to these reductionist and reactionary accounts, feminists have been compelled to adopt a defensive rather than offensive stance in defending past policy gains for girls and holding off the worst ravages of recuperative masculinist politics (Ailwood 2003, Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maws 1999, Kenway & Willis 1998, Lingard 2003). This defensive stance has importantly argued for a nuanced 'which boys/which girls?' approach to the issue of gender disadvantage – one that highlights how issues of class and indigeneity intersect to compound issues of gender injustice for both boys and girls within and (equally importantly) beyond the contexts of schooling – one that highlights that gender as a category variable is not an accurate predictor of educational disadvantage (Collins, Kenway & McLeod 2000, Francis 2000, Gilbert & Gilbert 2001, Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr 2002).

Despite an abundance of feminist and pro-feminist research and writing in this area that explores this issue and, moreover, highlights the significant socio-economic and cultural injustices that particular groups of girls and women continue to suffer as material consequences of the processes of schooling (see, for example, Allard & McLeod 2003), essentialised accounts expressing concern about boys' poor educational performance remain the most common refrain in dominant equity discourses (Hayes 2003, Lingard 2003). This certainly indicates that, in terms of pursuing the goals of gender equity in education, we should continue to be highly suspicious of the reductionist and reactionary tenor of well resourced and large scale programs such as *Success for Boys*. However, in negotiating and enabling spaces for gender justice (that move beyond rearticulating a competing victims dynamic) the potential inadequacies and constraints of such programs must continue to be explicated through critical lenses that can also identify how alternative initiatives can redress issues of gender injustice within and beyond the sphere of education (Luke 2003).

To these ends, this paper presents such critical lenses. Drawing on Fraser's (1997) work, the following articulates a theoretical framework of gender justice that identifies and seeks to redress socio-economic and cultural inequity through remedies of redistribution and recognition. In pursuing gender justice through such remedies, their seemingly contradictory logics are acknowledged and a transformative theory and politics is proposed. This theoretical framework is then drawn on to evaluate the transformative capacities of three initiatives that currently seek to address issues of social/gender equity in education within Australia: *The New Basics Project*, the *Productive Pedagogies Framework* and the *Success for Boys* initiative. In particular, the paper critically explores the extent to which these initiatives might be seen as either enabling or constraining a transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice within and beyond the contexts of schooling.

Critical lenses: a theoretical framework of transformative gender justice

In recognising that the particular goals of feminist and pro-feminist engagement in schooling are significant in shaping the ideologies of how we might pursue gender justice in education (Lingard 2003), the following foregrounds two broadly conceived understandings of injustice; socio-economic injustice and cultural injustice and briefly articulates their intersections with gender (Fraser 1997). Fraser defines socio-economic injustice as:

... rooted in the political-economic structure of society. Examples include exploitation (having the fruits of one's labor appropriated for

the benefit of others); economic marginalisation (being confined to undesirable or poorly paid work or being denied access to income-generating labor altogether), and deprivation (being denied an adequate material standard of living) (1997, p. 13).

In reference to the intersections of gender and socio-economic injustice, and arising from the enduring public/private ('productive'/'reproductive') division of labour, gender specific modes of exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation continue to be generated (Fraser 1997, Holter, 1995). On a global scale, these intersections of gender and class can be seen, for example, in the prevailing inequities of females' (relative to males') lower salaries; over-representation in part-time work; increasing and unprecedented levels of welfare dependency; fewer career opportunities; and a greater share of domestic responsibilities (Ailwood 2003, Hayes 2003, Lingard 2003, McLeod 2004a, Summers 2003). Fraser broadly conceives of cultural injustice as:

... rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. Examples include cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own); nonrecognition (being rendered invisible by means of the authoritative representational communicative, and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions) (1997, p. 14).

In reference to the intersections of gender and cultural or symbolic injustice, females as a group continue to suffer cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect within an enduring patriarchal world that continues to devalue and demean activities connoted as feminine. We see this devaluation in unacceptably high levels of sexual assault and exploitation; a pervasive culture of domestic violence; the trivialising and objectification of women and the under-representation of women in all areas of public life (Brabazon 2002, Fraser 1997, McLeod 2004a, Summers 2003).

In remedying such economic and cultural disadvantage, Fraser discusses the imperative of both a redistributive and cultural gender justice but importantly acknowledges, and attempts to move beyond, the problematics of pursuing these remedies simultaneously. Here, she theorises the aims of redistributive justice as associated with eliminating gender specific modes of exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation through transforming the inequities produced by a gendered political-economy. Central to this redistribution is dissolving the gender differentiation of the divisions of labour within and between the public and private spheres. A justice that

seeks to eliminate the cultural denigration and disparagement of 'femininity', on the other hand, Fraser notes, requires remedies based on gender differentiation, and more specifically positively recognising femininity. Here remedies that value the specificities of femininity are required to change the cultural valuations that privilege 'masculinity'. Against this backdrop, Fraser highlights the different (and apparently contradictory) logics that underpin these remedies: whereas the logic and remedies of gender redistribution are to abolish gender differentiation; the logic and remedies of gender recognition are to promote gender differentiation. In recognising these tensions, she delineates how these two different logics might be pursued simultaneously to '... change both political economy and culture [in ways that] ... undo the vicious circle of economic and cultural subordination' (Fraser 1997, p. 29).

In exploring this issue Fraser theorises the contrasting capacities of affirmative and transformative gender justice. She explains affirmative gender justice remedies as '... correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them...' and as invariably having the '... perverse effect of promoting group differentiation' (1997, p. 23). In terms of redistribution, and aligning with the tenets of liberal feminism, examples of affirmative gender justice include positive discrimination or affirmative action in relation to supporting women's greater access to particular areas of employment or study, for example. In terms of cultural justice, and aligning with the tenets of cultural feminism, affirmative redress involves efforts to affirm and revalue femininity (Fraser 1997). Fraser suggests that these remedies, while seemingly promising, are invariably superficial and counterproductive because they do not engage with the deep structures that generate gender injustice. Affirmative redistribution does not, in this regard, tend to problematise the division of labour (within and between the public and private spheres) that generates socio-economic gender injustice and affirmative cultural justice, in valorising gender specificity, does not tend to trouble the binary gender code.

In pursuing redistributive and cultural justice simultaneously, in ways that move beyond their contradictory logics, Fraser argues for a theory and politics of transformation. Here, the aim is to remedy social disadvantage through problematising and restructuring the underlying frameworks that generate such disadvantage. Thus, redistributive justice (and aligning with the tenets of socialist feminism) would seek to transform the inequities produced by a gendered political-economy through remedies that work to abolish the gender division of labour while transformative cultural justice remedies (and aligning with the tenets of feminist deconstruction), on the other hand, would seek to problematise, deconstruct and proliferate alternatives to the gender differentiation of binary and hierarchical understandings of masculinity and femininity.

Fraser articulates that such transformative theory and politics have the potential to redress gender injustice (and, indeed, other identity related injustices) in sustainable ways because they seek to restructure inequitable relations of production and recognition. The aim here is to replace inequitable hierarchies and dichotomies with ‘... networks of multiple intersecting differences that are demassified and shifting...’ (1997, p. 30). Importantly, transformative (unlike affirmative) politics and justice are seen to potentially dispel the competing logics between remedies of redistribution and recognition through blurring and destabilising, rather than promoting, group differentiation.

This transformative framework can be seen as especially useful in terms of evaluating the ideologies and practices of particular initiatives in the area of social/gender equity and schooling. Significantly, amidst the prevailing focus on boys in the gender equity debate, such a framework allows for the ‘... develop[ment of] a critical theory of recognition; one that identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality’ (Fraser 1997, p. 12). Importantly, within a schooling context, a coherent critical theory of recognition would support reform that seeks to address both the material consequences of educationally acquired capital beyond schools in terms of the socio-economic disadvantage suffered by particular groups of females (Collins et al. 2000, Hayes 2003, Luke 2003) and the enduring and unacceptably high levels of sex-based harassment and abuse that many girls and women continue to be subject to in schools (Ailwood 2003, Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005). More broadly, such an approach would identify and seek to redress the inequitable structures and practices that perpetuate gender injustice in schools – structures and practices, in particular, that privilege the ‘traditionally masculine’ such as staff hierarchies (that reflect an over-representation of males in positions of power), the hierarchical organisation and division of curricular and extra-curricular activities and the gendered nature of teacher practice (Alloway 1995, Connell 2000, Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997, Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003).

Transformative remedies in these areas would focus on recognising diversity and difference through promoting multiple ways of being masculine and feminine but within an affirmative and discerning critical framework that seeks to problematise and transform, rather than reinscribe, the gendered ways of being, practices and structures that limit and constrain students’ lifeworlds and future pathways. Of course, such transformative approaches in pursuing the goals of gender justice in education reflect key research and writing in this sphere (Alloway 1995, Epstein et al. 1999, Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Kenway & Willis 1998, MacNaughton 2000, Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005, Skelton 2001) and thus are far from new, however, in further articulating what a transformative gender justice agenda might look like, I would like to add to this

research and writing in evaluating some of the key curriculum and pedagogical reforms and initiatives that currently seek to address issues of social/gender equity in education within Australia. To these ends, the following draws on Fraser's theoretical work to evaluate the transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice capacities of *The New Basics Project*, the *Productive Pedagogies Framework* and the *Success for Boys* initiative.

Evaluating the capacities for transformative gender justice: The New Basics Project, the Productive Pedagogies Framework and the Success for Boys initiative

Spaces for redistributive gender justice: The New Basics Project

The New Basics Project is a framework of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that was being trialled in 58 Education Queensland schools (The State of Queensland 2003). The project 'radically re-envisions' curriculum to respond to the uncertainties, diversities and complexities that characterise the contemporary lifeworlds of students. The curriculum is organised as follows around four key areas and associated questions:

- Life Pathways and Social Futures [Who am I and where am I going?];
- Multiliteracies and Communications Media [How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?];
- Active Citizenship [What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?]; and
- Environments and Technologies [How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?] (The State of Queensland 2003).

In providing a scaffold to assist students to effectively navigate the forces of unprecedented change shaping contemporary postindustrial society; two 'fundamental educational premises' (there are five in total) underlying the framework can be seen as particularly generative (Queensland State Education 2000):

- 1 *The Futures Premise* Outcomes should be futures-oriented, based on a philosophy of education committed to the preparation of students for new workplaces, technologies and cultures.
- 2 *The Equity Premise* A principled selection and pedagogical provision of important, common learnings should address the economic and cultural aspirations of the most at-risk and culturally diverse communities.

Such futures and equity orientations, particularly in relation to the curriculum organiser: Life Pathways and Social Futures [Who am I and where am I going?], can be seen as potentially enabling of a transformative redistributive gender justice, primarily because these understandings and foci clearly do not position equity as reducible to school success (McLeod 2004b). *The New Basics*' commitment to equitable futures thus allows a focus on how the processes of schooling work to advantage and disadvantage particular groups beyond school and how these inequities might be addressed through the '... principled selection of pedagogical provision of important common learnings.' In providing a context for addressing the relationship between school performance and post-school patterns and experiences, this framework allows for a nuanced approach to the issue of redistributive justice, but importantly, in terms of gender justice, can draw attention, more specifically, to the gendered patterns of subject selection and vocational pathways that contribute to the future economic marginalisation and 'at-risk' status of many females (Collins et al. 2000, McLeod 2004b). In this respect, the futures and equity orientations underlying *New Basics* enables recognition of the broader structural disadvantages and power differentials experienced by women as a category (Lingard 2003).

Moreover, this framework's selection and organisation of 'important common learnings' represents clear potential in terms of redistributive gender justice. The four curriculum organisers (and associated questions) of the *New Basics* signify the potential to radically re-envision gender just within-school and post-school pathways. Central here is the framework's re-envisioning of the eight traditional discipline areas to reflect four key social questions. This re-envisioning can be seen as disrupting and transforming the hierarchical and gendered organisation of knowledge associated with the eight traditional discipline areas (Connell 2000, Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Skelton 2001). In terms of within-school pathways, this represents the capacity to challenge and reframe the privileging of masculinist knowledge by dissolving the distinction between high status discipline areas (for example, the Physical Sciences which are traditionally associated with males and masculinity) and low status discipline areas (for example, the Domestic Sciences which are traditionally associated with females and femininity).

Within a framework that can work to destabilise gender differentiation and equalise the value associated with particular knowledge areas, the *New Basics* represents the potential to disrupt and transform students' highly gendered subject choice patterns in the secondary sphere. In terms of post-school pathways, this represents the 'flow on' potential to transform the gendered choice of electives in vocational education – gendered choices that clearly constrain many students' post-school options (see Collins et al. 2000). Moreover, the commitment to prepare students for new workplaces, technologies and cultures within a curriculum framework that reflects

and interacts with real world issues and questions allows for greater connections and impacts between schools and broader local and global communities. These commitments and foci provide a scaffold to begin re-imagining and re-designing the inequitable and gendered relations of broader political economies.

Additionally, in terms of teacher practice, the *New Basics* framework has the potential to destabilise the gender differentiation of teachers' work specialisations (particularly prevalent in the secondary sphere). In disrupting the hierarchical and gendered knowledge boundaries of particular discipline areas, teachers in this curriculum environment are compelled to draw on their expertise to collaborate rather than isolate the specificities of their discipline. Certainly, this curriculum environment would seem more likely also to produce distributive and collaborative, rather than hierarchical leadership and in this sense, can be seen as potentially generative in disrupting and transforming the staff hierarchies that tend to position males with power and authority and tend to privilege masculinist modes of leadership and relating.

Against this backdrop, we can see how the *New Basics* framework aligns with Fraser's articulation of transformative redistributive gender justice. The futures and equity orientations underlying the framework (in allowing for a focus on how the processes of schooling work to disadvantage particular groups of females beyond school) and the re-envisioning of curriculum (in disrupting the gendered and hierarchical organisation of knowledge) can be seen as transforming the gender differentiation of the underlying structures that contribute to socio-economic gender injustice. In this respect, the *New Basics*' potential to radically re-envision gender just within school and post-school pathways provides spaces to both transform broader inequitable relations of production and proliferate more equitable alternatives to hierarchical and dichotomous relations (Fraser 1997).

Spaces for cultural gender justice: The Productive Pedagogies

In terms of transformative gender justice, the *Productive Pedagogies Framework* (both the pedagogical framework of *The New Basics Project* and the mandated pedagogical framework for state education in Queensland) has been presented as potentially generative (Keddie 2004, 2005, Lingard et al. 2002). The *Productive Pedagogies* (see Table 1) provide a scaffold to recognise and engage with student diversity and difference in intellectually demanding, socially supportive and connected ways. In this regard, the framework supports a nuanced approach to the issue of cultural injustice particularly as it integrates social justice issues within, rather than separate to, the pedagogical process through all four of its dimensions: Intellectual Quality; Connectedness; Recognition of Difference; and Supportive Classroom Environment (The State of Queensland 2001). The *Productive Pedagogies* represent the capacity to

redress cultural gender injustice through transforming the social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication that work to marginalise females and femininity (Fraser 1997). In particular the framework's focus on the problematising of knowledge and the valuing of non-dominant cultures can be drawn on to challenge (and explore alternatives to) the dominant and harmful constructions of masculinity that constrain the lifeworlds of males and females within and beyond the contexts of schooling.

The focus on the problematising of knowledge (a pedagogy in the dimension: Intellectual Quality) supports students to understand that knowledge, far from being fixed, unified and neutral, is dynamic, multi-faceted and value-laden (Lather 1992). This pedagogy supports students to question the social, political and cultural power relations that produce our knowledge and understandings through the presentation and critical analysis of multiple, contrasting and potentially conflicting perspectives (The State of Queensland 2002). This provides a platform for facilitating students' critical examination of the power inequities that construct gendered knowledge and generate such oppressive practices as sexual harassment and homophobia. Here the exploration of multiple, contrasting and potentially conflicting perspectives about masculinity and femininity can render problematic, and provide alternatives to, the inequitable assumptions and understandings that produce gender hierarchies and binaries (Fraser 1997).

The focus on valuing non-dominant cultural knowledges within an environment of social support, mutual respect and active citizenship (pedagogies within the dimensions: Recognition of Difference and Supportive Classroom Environment) provides a platform for recognising and valuing multiple ways of being male and female in respectful but also critical ways. These pedagogies support students to recognise, include and value a diverse range of cultures and ways of being and, within the context of mutual respect and active citizenship, facilitate a critical lens to support the discerning analysis of these cultures and ways of being in terms of social justice and equity (The State of Queensland 2002). In exploring gender diversity, this critical lens is most important in terms of legitimising gender just ways of being and problematising gender injustice.

These examples allude to the transformative capacities of the *Productive Pedagogies Framework* in terms of Fraser's articulation of cultural gender justice. The problematising of knowledge provides a scaffold to question the hierarchical and binary understandings of gender that produce cultural injustice while the valuing of difference and diversity facilitates a de-centring of dominant (and invariably inequitable) ways of being and allows for a proliferation and legitimising of alternatives. In this respect, the framework can be drawn on to restructure inequitable gender relations of recognition to reflect more equitable networks of multiple intersecting differences (Fraser 1997).

Intellectual Quality

| | |
|---|---|
| Higher order thinking | Students are engaged in higher order thinking and critical analysis |
| Depth of knowledge | Central concepts and their complex relations are covered in depth and detail |
| Depth of students' understanding | Students' work and responses provide evidence of understanding of concepts or ideas |
| Substantive conversation students, and between teachers and students | Classroom talk breaks out of the initiation/response evaluation pattern and leads to sustained dialogue between |
| Knowledge as problematic | Students critique and second-guess texts, ideas and knowledge |
| Meta-language | Aspects of language, grammar, and technical vocabulary are foregrounded |

Connectedness

| | |
|--|--|
| Knowledge integration | Teaching and learning ranges across diverse fields, disciplines and paradigms |
| Link to background knowledge | Teaching and learning is connected with students' background knowledge |
| Connection to the world beyond the classroom | Teaching and learning resembles or connects to real life contexts |
| Problem-based curriculum | Teaching and learning focuses on identifying and solving intellectual and/or real-world problems |

Supportive Classroom Environment

| | |
|--|--|
| Students' direction of activities | Students have a say in the pace, direction or outcomes of the lesson |
| Social support for student achievement | Classroom is a socially supportive, positive environment |
| Academic engagement | Students are engaged and on-task |
| Explicit quality performance criteria | Criteria for student performance is made explicit |
| Student self-regulation | The direction of student behaviour is implicit and self-regulatory |

Recognition of Difference

| | |
|--|---|
| Cultural knowledge values cultures | Diverse cultural knowledges are brought into play |
| Public representation of inclusive participation | Deliberate attempts are made to increase the participation of all students of different backgrounds |
| Narrative | Teaching draws on narrative rather than expository styles |
| Group identities in learning community | Teaching builds a sense of community and identity |
| Active Citizenship | Active citizenship is fostered |

**Table 1: The Productive Pedagogies:
Adapted from The State of Queensland (2001, p. 133)**

Certainly the transformative remedies that I have articulated in relation to *The New Basics Project* and the *Productive Pedagogies Framework* illuminate the imperative of key teacher threshold knowledges in the area of gender and schooling (Keddie 2005, Martino, Lingard & Mills 2004). While, for instance, the *New Basics* supports a radical re-envisioning of gender just post-school pathways and the *Productive Pedagogies* support a valuing of gender diversity; facilitating such transformative realities requires certain knowledges and understandings about gender and schooling. Understandings of gender as a social construction produced through binary understandings that privilege 'the masculine' and marginalise 'the feminine' are central here as are knowledges of how schools re/produce gender binaries and hierarchies. Thus, while these frameworks clearly support transformative redistributive and cultural justice, it is recognised here that drawing on such gender and schooling knowledges is imperative in enacting these frameworks in ways that support a critical approach to the issue of cultural recognition and social equality (Fraser 1997).

Moreover, and crucial to a coherent critical approach to transformative social justice, is the mutual compatibility of remedies or initiatives in pursuing the goals of redistributive and cultural justice in non-contradictory ways (Fraser 1997). As alluded to earlier, social/gender justice remedies that affirm difference will invariably undermine remedies that seek to destabilise difference and thus pursuing these remedies simultaneously would be counterproductive in terms of transformative justice. Such remedies would be at cross-purposes thereby amplifying the competing logics of the redistributive-recognition dilemma – as Fraser reminds us; potentially dispelling this dilemma requires transformative approaches to both redistribution and recognition. Through these lenses we can see that the *New Basics* and *Productive Pedagogies* hold out promise in terms of dispelling the contradictory logics of redistributive and cultural justice. The *New Basics* and *Productive Pedagogies* can be seen as conceptualising social equity and cultural recognition in ways that support rather than undermine one another (Fraser 1997). Both frameworks support a destabilising and restructuring of gender differentiation and thus are mutually compatible in how they might pursue gender justice. Here the conflicts between redistribution and recognition are minimised making a transformative gender justice more possible (Fraser 1997).

Gender justice and 'Success for Boys'

As briefly explained in the introduction, *Success for Boys* is a generously resourced federally funded project that aims to improve boys' motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes and will focus particularly on supporting disadvantaged and 'at risk' boys (defined as those at risk of disengaging from school) (DEST 2005). Federal Minister for Education Dr Brendan Nelson in his speech at the Making Schools Better Conference at the University of Melbourne in August 2004 articulated the key aims of

Success for Boys as associated with ‘... implementing proven initiatives to improve the education of boys especially in role modelling, literacy and information and communications technology.’ More specifically, these three key areas are defined by the project as follows:

- Giving boys opportunities to benefit from positive male role models and mentors
- Literacy teaching and assessment
- Using information and communication technology (ICT) to engage boys in learning (DEST 2005)

As suggested earlier, the warrant for this project is generated predominantly from the presentation of statistics that compare boys’ educational performance to girls’ educational performance. The background for the project outlines this warrant as follows:

Research indicates that many boys are underachieving across a broad spectrum of measures of educational attainment. These measures include early literacy achievement, results in most subjects at years 10 and 12, school retention levels and admission to higher education. Boys are also achieving less than optimal outcomes against a range of broader social indicators. Males are overrepresented among students experiencing disciplinary problems and school exclusion. Teenage boys are more likely than teenage girls to be unemployed, experience alcohol and substance abuse, or commit suicide (DEST 2005).

In analysing the focus and aims of *Success for Boys* within the context of Fraser’s work, we can see several areas that may be interpreted as theoretically untenable in terms of gender equity and thus likely constraining in terms of pursuing a sustainable and transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice; not least because the development of a critical theory of recognition in terms of pursuing social equality is greatly compromised within a boys’ only framework (Fraser 1997). Notwithstanding, in presenting statistics comparing boys’ and girls’ performance within and beyond school, *Success for Boys* presents boys’ issues as justice issues through positioning boys as disadvantaged or lacking in terms of gender equity. In considering Fraser’s broad conceptions of economic and cultural injustice, this positioning of boys is obviously untenable; as stated earlier, girls as a group, relative to boys as a group are far more likely to suffer from economic and cultural injustice. Further, there is a selective use of comparative data in attempting to legitimise a focus on boys, which is also untenable within the gender equity premise of *Success for Boys*.

In terms of academic outcomes, comparisons between females' and males' performance in the areas of literacy, subject results in years 10 and 12, school retention and higher education admission are used to make a case for gender inequity in terms of schooling, however, the longer-term equity impacts of these comparisons are not mentioned. This is a crucial omission in relation to a critical theory of recognition towards redistributive gender justice and likely to undermine the cause of social equality (Fraser 1997). As feminists and pro-feminists have been arguing for some time; boys' poorer performance relative to girls in the area of literacy does not disadvantage them post-school (indeed boys have been under-performing girls in the area of literacy for over 100 years); the highly gendered subject selection of upper secondary school means that boys' overall poorer performance does not disadvantage them post-school in the ways that this subject selection disadvantages girls; and boys' lower retention rates and lower participation in terms of higher education does not disadvantage them in terms of vocational education and training and the world of work (Collins et al. 2000, Kenway & Willis 1998, Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005, Rowe 2004). In reducing gender equity to school success (McLeod 2004b) *Success for Boys* fails to acknowledge the material consequences of schooling in terms of males' relative economic advantage beyond school and thus is clearly at odds with, and potentially constraining to, the redistributive redress imperative for socio-economic gender justice (Ailwood 2003, Collins et al. 2000, Fraser 1997, McLeod 2004b).

In terms of social outcomes, comparisons between females' and males' performance in the areas of discipline, school exclusion, and more broadly alcohol and substance use and suicide are drawn on to provide a rationale for a focus on boys. These selective social comparisons are presented in the same context as the comparisons of academic performance and against the gender equity backdrop purported by *Success for Boys* it seems to be implied that boys are somehow suffering an injustice in this regard because of their gender. Indeed, the wording in the above paragraph in terms of males: 'experiencing (rather than initiating or being responsible for) disciplinary problems and school exclusion' and the particular comparisons selected (issues associated predominantly with self harm such as suicide and alcohol abuse rather than harm to others) seem to support this construction of boys. Notwithstanding, even if these social issues do reflect injustice for some boys, such selective comparisons remain clearly untenable within a gender equity/justice framework given the enormous cultural and social injustices females suffer as a group at the hands of, and relative to, males as a group within and beyond schooling contexts. With this in mind, such a context does not seem to be conducive to enabling a focus on social outcomes and gender justice in terms of redressing the cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect of females and femininity (Fraser 1997).

Against this backdrop, *Success for Boys* can be seen as framed by a weak and unconvincing platform in terms of gender equity/justice. Moreover, and referring to Fraser's distinctions between affirmative and transformative justice, *Success for Boys* seems generally to employ an affirmative politics and theory of redressive justice. To this end, while a 'which boys?' approach is acknowledged in some of the information presented about the project (for example, on the *Success for Boys* website variables such as cultural background, socioeconomic status and geographic location are recognised as impacting on boys' educational outcomes), the clear tenor of *Success for Boys* is the affirming of gender difference between males and females. To these ends, and reminiscent of the liberal feminist approaches for girls in the 1980s, there is a focus on gender difference and equity as this relates to issues of access and opportunity for ensuring greater educational success for boys (Fraser 1995).

This affirmative politics of gender differentiation is particularly apparent when considering the three key intervention areas as remedy areas for improving boys' academic and social outcomes (giving boys opportunities to benefit from positive male role models and mentors; literacy teaching and assessment; and using information and communication technology to engage boys in learning). Certainly, the high visibility of these intervention areas within gender debates can be seen as generated from outcomes-based, simplistic and partial accounts of boys' (versus girls') schooling performance – as such, many reforms that predominate within these areas often draw on essentialist notions of boys' ways of being framed within an access and equity platform. For example, in relation to positive male role models, interventions to increase the number of male teachers in boys' lives are often underpinned by an understanding that 'feminine' and 'feminised' school environments disadvantage boys and that a more equitable balance of male/female teachers would somehow work to remedy this 'disadvantage' through boys' greater access to males and 'masculinity' (Mills, Martino & Lingard 2004). Similarly, many reforms put forward to improve boys' educational outcomes in the areas of literacy and ICT promote 'boy-friendly' curriculum and pedagogy (such as increasing 'masculine' content, resources and teaching styles) as remedies to counter-balance the (supposedly) excessively 'feminised' or 'girl-friendly' climate of contemporary classrooms and schools (Alloway 1995, Keddie 2006, Francis 2000, Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Lingard & Douglas 1999, Martino et al. 2004).

Such reforms when they are informed by an affirmative politics of access and equity are clearly problematic when considering their potential to re-inscribe dominant and essentialised constructions of masculinity – more equity in terms of greater numbers of male teachers may simply re-inscribe boys' binary and hierarchical understandings of masculinity as might 'boy-friendly' curriculum and pedagogy. Certainly, an affirmative politics in terms of boys' literacy and ICT will likely amplify their continued

enduring domination of space and resources in both these areas. Notwithstanding the obvious un-tenability of an affirmative gender justice approach to these areas of boys' education (within the context of broader inequitable structures and practices beyond the school), this approach is clearly at odds with the theory and politics of transformative redistributive and cultural justice that characterise such initiatives as *The New Basics* framework and the *Productive Pedagogies*. Within an affirmative framework such reforms are likely to re-inscribe, rather than destabilise gender differentiation and thus also reinforce, rather than dispel, the competing logics of the redistribution-recognition dilemma. Moreover, in terms of assessing the mutual compatibility of these three interventions we can see that the affirmative politics and theory framing *Success for Boys* potentially undermines, and thus is at cross-purposes with, the transformative theory and politics of *The New Basics* and *Productive Pedagogies* (Fraser 1997). In this respect, the intervention areas of *Success for Boys* as they sit within the program's broader aims and gender equity platform appear to represent limited capacities in terms of transformative cultural (promoting gender diversity) and redistributive (engaging with the deep structures that generate gender inequities) justice (Fraser 1997).

Such reforms and strategies might be developed and pursued in gender just and transformative ways (that move beyond blaming and essentialising), for example, the male role model issue in terms of increasing the number of male teachers in schools could work to disrupt and transform the gendered work specialisations and hierarchies in schools and thus align with a redistributive gender justice in blurring gender differentiation. However, *Success for Boys'* broader affirmative platform undermines support for such transformative politics. *Success for Boys* in further enabling boys' issues to colonise the space of gender equity, particularly in the key intervention areas, rather than areas associated more explicitly with social outcomes (for example, exploring, challenging and transforming harmful understandings and enactments of masculinity), is more likely to re-inscribe the broader social systems and structures that privilege 'the masculine' and construct gender inequities. In terms of the case presented in justifying this program; that is, boys' poor performance in the areas of literacy, discipline, school retention and exclusion rates, and broader issues such as alcohol, substance use and suicide; the three focus areas seem to be gravely inadequate with regard to how these problems might begin to be addressed. It seems that constraining boys' performance (to varying extents) in all of these areas is the issue of restrictive masculinity as associated with power, domination and risk-taking. Thus, one would think that the most significant intervention area for such a program would be 'exploring issues of identity, gender and masculinity with boys'.

Concluding remarks

It is imperative that nothing is done which undermines the important and necessary progress which has been made in the last twenty years in the education of girls...

These words were spoken by Dr Brendan Nelson (2004) as part of the same speech I referred to earlier in relation to the *Success for Boys* project (2004). Certainly, many would say that the 'boy-turn' and presumptive equity of current gender policy and practice has already undermined 'progress' for girls (Ailwood 2003, Hayes 2003, Lingard 2003) – this paper argues that continued barriers to transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice in education will further undermine this progress.

Drawing on Fraser's transformative theory and politics, this paper has attempted to articulate how particular interventions might be seen as either enabling or constraining in terms of redistributive and cultural gender justice. Here, the weak gender equity platform and affirmative politics of *Success for Boys* was seen as compromising a coherent critical theory of recognition in pursuing social equity through distorting issues of gender and injustice and promoting gender differentiation. In this respect, the material consequences of schooling in terms of males' relative economic advantage beyond school and the cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect females are subject to as a group within (and beyond) schools was ignored. Significantly, the affirmative politics and gender differentiation that appeared, in particular, to frame the key intervention areas of *Success for Boys* were seen as inconsistent with the transformative politics necessary in pursuing sustainable approaches to redistributive and cultural gender justice. In terms of this initiative's limited capacities to both engage with the deep structures that generate gender disadvantage and promote gender diversity (Fraser 1997), *Success for Boys* may indeed be interpreted as undermining progress in the education of girls.

On the other hand, through Fraser's transformative lenses, the aims and focus areas of *The New Basics Project* and the *Productive Pedagogies Framework* were assessed as potentially generative in terms of enabling redistributive and cultural gender justice. *The New Basics'* equity and futures foci and curriculum organisation and the *Productive Pedagogies* problematising of dominant cultural knowledges were seen to support a coherent critical theory of recognition in terms of the capacity to recognise and redress gender disadvantages within and beyond schooling contexts. *The New Basics* represented transformative capacity in terms of redistributive gender justice in availing the restructuring of the gendered within school and post-school pathways that lead to the inequitable relations of production while the *Productive Pedagogies* represented transformative capacity in terms of cultural gender justice in facilitating

the problematising of the inequitable gender relations of recognition. Central here was pursuing gender justice through destabilising, rather than enforcing, the gender differentiation that underlies the socio-economic and cultural subordination of females as a group.

Fraser's transformative lenses are clearly useful in identifying the gender justice capacities of particular reforms in the area of social equity and schooling as well as the potential limitations of such reforms. Importantly, in drawing on this framework to articulate the limitations of particular initiatives, we can also see how they may be strategically and generatively located within a framework of transformative gender justice. In this respect, for example, to refer to the intervention areas of *Success for Boys*, the issue of increasing the number of male role models and mentors in boys' lives would be understood as positive if it signalled a dissolution, not perpetuation of gendered and masculinist hierarchies and ways of being (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998). Similarly, interventions that focus on literacy teaching and assessment and the increased use of information and communication technology would be seen as positive if they did not reinscribe essentialist and dominant constructions of masculinity.

In light of the reductionist and reactionary cultures that continue to support the enduring moral concern about boys' schooling performance and sideline many issues still to be adequately addressed for girls (Ailwood 2003), the critical evaluation of initiatives seeking to address issues of social/gender equity in terms of transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice is imperative. This is crucial in developing a critical theory of recognition of gender equity that does not '...undermine the important and necessary progress which has been made in the last twenty years in the education of girls' (Nelson 2004).

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